

how cliché of me (to fall in love in a coffee shop) by topangamatthews

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Summary:

Mike Wheeler hates writers that say they have to be in a coffee shop to write. But then he finds the prettiest girl he's ever seen, a barista, and suddenly he can't seem to write anywhere else.

(based on the prompt: el is a coffee shop worker and mike is writer and one day he stumbles in and then he continues coming to write (and see a certain someone) and they fall in love.)

how cliché of me (to fall in love in a coffee shop)

Mike Wheeler hates *those* writers: someone who has to be seated at a coffee shop or in a cafe to write. Writers should be able to write anywhere; he *believes* in that. But now he's exactly one of those people who he hates, driving with his backpack filled with notebooks and pens and a thesaurus in the passenger seat to the nearby Starbucks.

And in his defense, it's really the fault of his roommate for putting him in this position. Ever since Will has gotten a boyfriend, the boy in his art class he had been obsessing about for months, he brings him around to their (tiny) apartment all the time. Which is fine. Mike is so happy to see Will being in love with a permanent smile etched on his face.

Except that it's a big distraction when he can hear them so clearly in Will's room and they cook dinners together in the kitchen and paint together in the living room in front of the windows. It's an especially annoying distraction when his publisher has him on a tight deadline and Mike can't even find the silence to think about what his next novel is going to be about. And so with a day left to come up with an outline and a first chapter, he leaves to a coffee shop to try and find inspiration and leaves his self respect at his apartment.

He ends up getting to Starbucks about twenty minutes later, having to park his car a few streets down since it's a Sunday and everyone seems to be out roaming the streets of Chicago. He envies them, enjoying the beautiful weather that cool autumn morning as they walk in couples or groups to shops and restaurants. Meanwhile, he trudges his way up the street alone in a plan to spend the whole day indoors and forcing himself to write.

When he finally gets to the Starbucks, he opens the door only to realize that it is completely packed. If he takes two steps ahead, he will literally be in the line that leads to the register. All the tables and the bars are occupied with people laughing over their drinks and croissants and he very much wants to flip one over because surely this is a sign from the universe that he's not meant to get any writing done.

With a roll of his eyes and a sigh, he turns back around and exits the building. He takes a look at his watch and decides it's still early enough to spend time trying to find another coffee shop. The only other one he knows about is the one on campus, but he knows it's closed on the weekends so he crosses the street and decides to go exploring for a new one.

He passes by a few, all of them only slightly less packed than the Starbucks, and he thinks he's never going to find one that is empty and quiet. Until he does.

It's a brick building, lodged in between the tiniest book store he's ever seen and a pawn shop. The name of the coffee shop, written in white paint in neat letters, Java Nice Day, makes him chuckle to himself. He peers inside the window and sees that there's only about three other customers, and he sends a message of gratitude out into the universe for finally finding a place where he can sit and write in peace.

Mike opens the door, a tiny bell going off overheard to signal that someone walked in. The place has hardwood floors, the walls painted a light blue with framed black and white pictures of people he doesn't recognize hanging on them. There's square wooden tables on the sides of the walls, a few circular ones scattered around them, and Mike instantly spots an empty table near the front window that he knows is going to be perfect.

He finds himself smiling, walking up to the register in tune with the happy acoustic song playing lightly throughout the shop, trying to discreetly sniff the air that surrounds it, smells of coffee beans and chocolate and butter. The menu is on a wall up and behind the register, his eyes focused on reading the items listed in white chalk. And it is that focus that makes him absolutely shocked when he hears the voice of the cashier and he finally looks down to find-

"Hi! What can I get for you today?"

-the most beautiful girl he's ever seen looking at him.

The first thing that registers through his mind is that her voice, coming out of the most perfect pink lips he's ever seen, is thick and

sweet like honey, but the second is that her eyes are like two big and deep pools of it, all light brown swirls and shining. She has the daintiest nose he's ever seen, a sharp contrast to her defined cheekbones and jaw. Her brown hair is pulled back into a high bun, a couple curls falling out of it in the back and in the front that incidentally frame her face.

She's wearing a yellow sundress, her name tag pinned up and over her heart, showing that her name is "El," and it suddenly becomes the most perfect combination of two letters that Mike has ever seen. It isn't until Mike's eyes go back to her face that he notices she has an eyebrow raised and her mouth is turned sideways into a slight smirk.

"I'm sorry. What," Mike coughs, trying to feign that *that* is the reason why he's currently blushing, something he knows he is because he can feel the embarrassing heat rising on his cheeks, and not because he was just caught staring at the prettiest woman in existence.

"Your order," she giggles, pointing up and behind her to the menu. "What would you like to order?"

"Oh," Mike says, feeling like an idiot. He looks back up at the menu, trying to use it as time to look away from her and get his face back to its natural color. "Can I get a medium hazelnut latte and a cinnamon roll?"

She punches in some numbers into the register before looking at him with such a familiar smile, Mike swears he must have known her in another life.

"Your total will be \$4.26," she tells him, taking out a permanent marker from the black apron tied around her waist and going to grab a medium sized plastic white cup, holding it up in the palm of her hand. "Name?"

"What," he asks, fumbling around with his wallet and stopping to look at her.

"Your name," she asks again, tapping the cup with the back of the permanent marker.

“Mik- Mike,” he stutters.

She writes on his cup and puts it down to take the five-dollar bill from his hand and put it in the register and give him his change.

“I’ll call you when it’s ready,” she smiles again and he nods in understanding before she turns away with the cup to go and make his order.

He puts the change she gave him in the mason jar on the counter, labeled with a piece of white paper “TIPS” taped on there and filled less than halfway with bills and coins. The seventy-four cents are the least of the least he could do for acting like an idiot in front of her.

He curses himself in his head as he walks to the empty table near the window that he had spotted earlier, plopping down onto the chair and putting his backpack on top of the wooden surface. He begins taking out his notebooks, blank and waiting to be filled with notes that will make a literary masterpiece, and then takes out his pens and highlighters, uncapping just one black pen and opening one of his notebooks to its first page.

“Mike,” he hears, and he looks up to see that El is at the end of the counter, a cup of coffee and a small brown paper bag in front of her. He quickly gets up and walks to her, trying his best to return the small smile she’s giving him. She begins to walk away and he does too, but when he looks down at his cup he notices that she wrote “Mike Mike” on it, just like he’d told her.

He feels embarrassed, walking back to his table with his head hung low. Only when he sits down, he looks up and sees El looking at him with a huge grin on her face. It’s not malicious in the slightest and she quickly winks at him before turning away, causing his entire body to feel like it’s on fire. Damn it if that wasn’t the cutest thing he’d ever seen.

He goes to take a drink out of his coffee, a huge smile still on his face. Until he takes a drink of the coffee and nearly *chokes* from the taste, awful and bitter and not at all tasting like hazelnut. He swallows it down by force and then decides that maybe it’s not as bad he thinks, but he takes another sip of it and it’s just as bad.

Mike suddenly remembers what his mother used to tell him when he was younger and complained about food, about how he should be grateful for every bite and sip he takes because there are people in the world that are starving. But then he thinks, *well my mom isn't here*, and puts the coffee aside. The cinnamon roll is thankfully a lot better, warm and buttery and sweet, and he only takes small sips in between bites to help with how thirsty the dessert makes him.

When he looks back up he sees that El is talking to another employee, a girl with red hair and a black T-shirt who's looking in his direction. She looks back at El and murmurs something, laughing right before El smacks at her arm. El peers over her shoulder, Mike's breath hitching in his throat, and she quickly turns back around to her friend.

Mike feels his blush coming back to him at the thought of El and her coworker talking about it. He knows he's not attractive in the way other boys girls usually fawn over are. He doesn't have blue eyes or toned muscles or dimples. He's just six feet tall of awkward and lanky limbs, black hair that always seems to get into his eyes and freckles scattered over cheeks that make him look like boyish.

The rational part of him knows that there is no possible way that a girl like El, a girl that is pure angelic features, would be romantically interested in a guy like him. The optimistic part of him though hopes that she does anyways. Because he's been in this coffee shop for only twenty minutes and he can already see himself falling for this girl if she smiles more at him. (He can also see himself falling out of love if she gives him any more god-awful coffee.)

Mike goes to throw his trash away, trying not to cringe at the loud thump of the full cup of coffee hitting the bottom of the trashcan, before going back to the table and readying himself to devote the entirety of his day writing.

He picks the pen up in his fingers, hovering the tip of it over the page, and waits for inspiration to hit him. He waits a few minutes and realizes it's taking him a little longer than expected.

The thing was, his first and only published novel had been published eight months ago at the beginning of the year in February. It had

been a book he'd been working on for ages, a fantasy novel about a princess who gets cursed and has her memory taken away. She fights witches and trolls, all the meanwhile falling in love with the peasant who is accompanying her only to discover that she had been betrothed and in love with a knight who'd been away on a journey before her memory had been taken away.

It was an idea he had had since he was 12 and worked on diligently since he was 13, finishing it around his 17th birthday in 1988 and finally getting it published that year in 1990. He was proud of it, the fact that he was a published author during his first year of college, but now starting his second year, he found himself lost as to what his next idea should be. The first had taken up so much time and devotion, he hadn't realized he would have needed a second idea.

His publisher had been patient with him, having waited about six months after the release of his novel to let him know they would be more than happy to work with him on a second novel after his moderate success. Even if the book hadn't exactly been a bestseller, all its reviews had been spectacular, raving particularly on Mike's ability to write characters and interweave relationships. Which is what had led to his publisher's notes of focusing his novels more on characters and less in fantasy aspects.

Keep it grounded, they had told him in a meeting.

But right now, Mike isn't keeping it *anywhere* considering that the idea didn't even exist in his mind. The only thing that is currently running through his mind is her- crazy curls and sneaky glances and pink lips drawn into a smile. And before he's able to stop himself, he's writing it down. His observations about her and the little mannerisms he's already noticed and when he finally stops writing he realizes he has an entire page filled with writing.

Just like that, inspiration hits him and he turns the page to begin outlining his next novel. He sees it all so clearly and his hand tries its best to keep up with the pace of the ideas running around in his head. By the time he's done, he has about six pages filled, blue and black ink everywhere, and he goes back with highlighter to read through and mark the story's pivotal points.

It's when he's going to the next blank page, to make a list of all his characters and their relations to each other, that he hears a very loud and indiscreet "psst."

Mike looks up and sees El looking at him, a playful smile on her face. He turns around just to make sure she's really looking at him, and she moves her hand in gesture for him to go over. He tries to keep his cool as he gets up from his seat to walk over to her, her smile turning softer the closer he gets to her.

"I got you another coffee," El tells him quietly, and he notices for the first time that there's a cup sitting on the counter.

"Oh," Mike says in surprise. "Do you guys give free refills?"

"No," she smiles, tucking one of her stray curls behind her ear. "But you looked like you were working hard over there, so I'm giving you one anyways."

Mike feels like he can't breathe suddenly, like he just forgot how to do it in one quick second. Because holy crap, the pretty barista made him free coffee and admitted to having been watching him. And he totally rescinds his previous statement about how if she gave him shit coffee he wouldn't fall for her. Because he's falling.

Mike Wheeler is falling *fast*.

"Thanks," he finally says, taking the cup from the counter and smiling at her with shy eyes.

"Don't mention it," she shrugs and then leans in closer. "Seriously don't. I'm not supposed to give out free drinks."

He leans back out to look at her, to see if she's serious and he's pretty sure she is. But she's still smiling, cute dimples on either side of her, and she goes back to the register at the sound of a customer walking in. He watches as she goes and walks back to his table, taking another sip of the horrendous coffee. He decides he'll force himself to drink it all no matter if it kills him because El made it especially for him. (And he tells himself it tastes just like it *might* kill him.)

By the time he's nearing the end of the first draft of his chapter, Mike

looks up to realize that El is wiping away at tables and putting chairs up. He looks at his watch and realizes it's almost 5 o'clock, unable to believe he really spent that much time absorbed in his writing.

"Sorry for being here so late," he tells El, starting to stand up and gather his things but she speaks up quickly.

"It's okay," she says, and then checks the clock on the wall. "You still have about thirty minutes left before I have to close. You can finish your writing."

"Thank you," he says again, and sits back down to finish his writing.

Even with his mind focused, he still hears the sound of El's soft voice as she sings along to the music still playing in the shop as she cleans up. She finally ends up at his table, having saved his for last and he picks up all his things for her to clean the surface.

She goes back behind the counter, giving him a simple wave and he awkwardly returns it, taking that as his cue to his leave. He walks through the doors he had walked through in the morning, taking in the cold evening air and feeling different somehow. Like Chicago was different now somehow. Now that he knew El existed as part of it.

Mike turns back to look inside the shop, deciding he would wait for El to walk her to wherever she had to go next, if she'd let him. Part of him is a little scared that this will be the last time he'll ever see her. As if this was a once in a life time opportunity that will never happen again.

He's still stuck in his thoughts, his bottom lip caught between his teeth in anxiety, when he hears the same bell and sees that El has walked out, dressed in a brown coat and green scarf that covers her dress.

"Mike Mike," she says, her voice filled with mirth. "Did you forget something inside?"

"No," he says, shaking his head and making his hair get into his eyes that he has to move away. "I was just wondering if it would be okay if I walked you to your car or wherever you're going. Since you gave

me free coffee and let me finish writing, you know? it's the least I can do."

He hopes he doesn't sound creepy because he's not trying to be, but he remembers how his sister always complains about guys she has no interest in coming onto her and not being able to take a hint. Thankfully though, El's smile is all genuine and she nods her head.

"I parked that way," she says, pointing in a general direction that's across the street and around a corner. "You?"

"Yup. Same."

"Okay," she giggles. She turns and grabs keys out of her coat pocket, locking the door of the shop and wiggling the doorknob to make sure that it's really closed. She stuffs her hands in her coat pockets and turns back towards Mike. "Let's go."

He smiles at her, trying to keep the same pace she has, steady and casual strides. He wonders if she's walking slower than usual so that they have more time together. He knows for sure that he is.

"So you're a writer," she asks him.

"Yeah," he says, feeling weird about mentioning the fact that he's published. He doesn't want it to seem like he's bragging or trying to impress her, even though he wouldn't mind if he did impress her. "And I'm a student, too. I'm majoring in English Literature."

"Me, too," she says excitedly.

"Are you at the university," he asks her. Because if she is, that means they may have a class together sometime. He has a chance of seeing her around on campus or maybe he can go to school events and see her there, too.

"No," she answers though, and he tries not to feel disappointed. "I'm at Truman. Trying to save money before I transfer."

"Smart," he tells her and she giggles in response before stopping in front of a gray car parked on the sidewalk. "This is me. Thanks for walking me to my car, Mike."

“Of course, El.” And he realizes how good the name sounds rolling off his tongue.

El. El. El.

She unlocks the door and slides inside, shutting it behind her. He stays there until she turns the car on, making sure she’s still safe as she buckles herself in and checks the rearview mirror. She spares him a glance, waving goodbye at him before getting onto the street, and he waves goodbye back.

He watches until the gray isn’t noticeable anymore and decides to hope some more. He decides to hope that it won’t be the last time he’ll see her.

And then he turns around in the opposite direction and begins to walk towards his car.

Mike’s publisher ends up loving his new idea, practically devouring all of his notes and gives him the go ahead to continue writing it. He happily obliges.

He tries to find the time in between classes and homework to work on it, but he can’t seem to concentrate on it long enough to get more than a couple sentences written down. His mind keeps going back to the girl in the coffee shop, to El, and he doesn’t know if it will ever really return.

Even Will seems to get out of his own little love bubble long enough to know that something is up with him, can see it all over his face. In his eyes.

“Are you okay,” he asks Mike over dinner, the both of them sitting on the living room couch with bowls of macaroni and cheese in their hands.

“Yeah. Why,” he responds. A girl in the commercial playing on the

TV appears with brown curly hair and he quirks a smile at the memory of El tucking her hair behind her ear when she was talking to him.

“You seem like you’re...away somewhere? Almost like...”

“Almost like?”

“Almost like you met someone new. Someone that you like,” Will finishes off, a special gleam in his eyes and Mike would blush at being caught in the truth if it was anyone besides his best friend.

“Yeah,” Mike smiles. “I think I did.”

That Sunday he goes back to the coffee shop, a little afraid on the way over that he’s forgotten where it is but he remembers. His heart knows.

He parks closer to it than he had before and checks his appearance in the car’s mirror, making sure he doesn’t have any embarrassing eye crust or dried toothpaste around his mouth. He runs a hand through his hair, trying to tame it a bit and failing before giving up because it’s not going to get any better for him.

Mike grabs his backpack, locks the door, checks his appearance one last time in the reflection of his car, and begins to walk towards the coffee shop. When he gets inside he notices it’s a little busier than it was the previous weekend, but it’s still pretty empty. The table he had been sitting at is still unoccupied and he gets happy at the idea of sitting there for the rest of the day.

There’s already a customer in front of him, a man shorter than him, and he can see the easy going expression on El’s face as she takes his order. And *God* is she still beautiful.

Her hair is pulled back into a high ponytail and she’s wearing a black sweater, the material clinging to her body in a way that’s making Mike feel lightheaded. Because combined with that, she’s wearing tight jeans and he can clearly see the exact shape of her body, every single curve. Plus, she’s wearing red lipstick, so it makes her lips even more noticeable than they were before and he’s wondering what it

would feel like if to have her lips on his-.

“Mike,” El smiles, and he realizes that the other customer had left and he’s been left standing alone.

“El,” he greets back, walking up to the counter.

“Did you come back to do some more writing?”

“That’s what I’m hoping for.”

She laughs at that and goes to grab her permanent marker from her apron.

“Do you want the same as last week,” she asks him kindly and he might have said yes, might have been distracted at the fact that she still remembers his name from last week and what he ordered, if the coffee wouldn’t have been so bad.

“Actually,” he says, trying to think of something quickly. He can’t very well tell her that he *never* wants to drink that damned hazelnut latte from hell again. “I wanna try something new. Just to see what else you guys have.”

“Oh.”

“What do you recommend,” he asks her, the question coming out flirter than he intended it to sound but it slips out that way. But El raises an eyebrow and puts her hand on the counter to lean in closer and he doesn’t seem to mind so much.

“You’re asking the wrong person,” she laughs and shakes her head a bit. “I only drink black coffee.”

His eyes go wide at that and he teases her a bit.

“Well you’re braver than me.”

“My dad is a cop,” El explains, still laughing. Still smiling. Still leaning in. “He would be outraged if I drank my coffee any other way.”

Mike leans in, too. "That's hardcore."

At that El leans back, throwing her head back a bit as she laughs and Mike has decided that out of everything he's done in his life, he is most proud of himself for making El laugh. (Is that something he can put on his resume? That he made the prettiest girl in the world laugh?)

"How about a caramel macchiato," she recommends. "That's one of our more popular drinks."

"Is it sweet?"

"I can make it sweet," she says with a smirk and he swears that she's flirting with him then if she wasn't already.

"Okay. A medium caramel macchiato then," Mike smiles, going to take out his wallet. "And a cinnamon bun, too. Please."

He pays her the total and goes to sit down at the table near the window, once again getting out everything he needs to be able to devote himself to his writing without any distractions. (Maybe one distraction, but it's not his fault when she's so damn pretty.)

El calls him up to get his order and when he does he notices that she's drawn a little smiley face beside his name and it makes him unbelievably happy, no matter how embarrassing it is that it's all because of two little black eyes and a curved smile drawn in permanent ink. He would keep the cup if it wasn't so weird to do so. He spends the rest of his time at the coffee shop taking peeks at it between writing so he won't forget what it looks like, even after he finishes his drink. Which thankfully, is actually really good.

And when El is closing up, she asks him if he wouldn't mind walking her to her car again and he says he doesn't mind one bit.

And when she sends a smile his way he thinks about how no permanent marker drawing could ever do it any justice.

Mike hopes that El doesn't think he's weird for secretly making her part of his Sunday routine. But he does. He integrates seeing her as part of his weekend plans to the point that when Will and Lucas ask him if he wants to go see a movie with them that day, he tells him that he's busy. And he is.

He's busy waking up, putting on one of his sweaters (he only ever wears sweaters now when he sees her after El had mentioned how much she loved them once), gathering his things, getting into his car, driving to Java Nice Day, and staring at El for hours until she's off work and he can walk her to her car.

It's quite honestly the best part of his whole week, a more than suitable pay off to the torturous hours he spends during the week stuck in the library writing papers.

He tells her this once when he's walking with her, shyly and his hand rubbing at the back of his neck, and she's almost offended that he thinks being stuck at the library is terrible.

"I want to be a librarian, you know," she tells him, her nose pointed up and it's so pink from the cold weather that Mike doesn't have the heart to tell her that she's more cute than menacing.

"Yeah well if you were there, then I wouldn't consider it a bad place to be stuck at," he says, a sly look on his face. He doesn't know if she turns pink from the cold or because she's blushing but he enjoys it either way.

They flirt more often than not and he notices that it's not a physical attraction he has towards her. Well, not *just* that. El is kind and intelligent and funny. Seeing her becomes less to do with seeing her and more to do with talking to her and listening to what she has to say.

Mike feels for her the way he's never really felt about another person before. Not Danny Ackermann with the pretty blue eyes in the seventh grade. Or Jennifer Hayes with the short cheerleading skirt in the tenth grade. Or even Cassie Adams with the cool blue hair who

he had last year as his mandatory biology lab partner.

No, Mike Wheeler has never felt the same way about a person like he has about El Hopper. (He learns that her last name is Hopper when he makes a joke about her being too short to see over the steering wheel and lying about her height, so she whips out her driver's license and shoves it in his face.) El Hopper is a one of a kind, once in a lifetime kind of girl and he knows the universe has done more than its fair share of kindness towards him by introducing her to him.

On the sixth Sunday in a row that Mike has gone to the coffee shop, he enters and "Here Comes The Sun" by The Beatles is playing lightly. She's at the counter, her hip against it and her hand holding a book while her other twirls a curl around her finger. No one else is in the shop besides an elderly couple in the corner of the room and El is singing along softly to the song.

He can tell by the way she's smiling and moving her lips and when he gets closer to her, she puts the book down and starts to sing a little louder and towards.

Here comes the sun, and I say it's alright.

And when he looks at her he thinks, *yeah. She's the sun.*

He joins her for what's left of the song, his voice softer and shyer than her pretty and confident one. She takes his order. He goes to sit down and calls him back when his coffee is ready. He notices the sun drew on the cup next to his name and they share a smile before he goes to start writing.

Just the way it should be.

The next weekend when Mike goes into the coffee shop, El sees when he walks in and her smile grows. She goes back in to the kitchen and comes back with his order already prepared.

“On me,” she tells him, handing him the drink and the small paper bag.

“El, I can’t let you do this,” Mike says, already reaching for his wallet. “You’re already way nicer to me than you have to be.”

“I think I’m exactly nice enough,” El says, pushing his money away.

It’s the first time that their hands have touched, that they’ve touched. Her soft palm over his fingers. Mike feels electricity shoot through his veins. Or maybe it’s more like a butterfly attack on all his organs. Or maybe it’s another metaphor, another experience that’s never happened and he doesn’t have the words for. It feels in that moment that he doesn’t have words for what he’s feeling at the simple touch.

“Thanks, El,” he says, putting the money right into the top jar and grabbing the coffee and cinnamon roll before she has a chance to protest.

When he’s sat down at his table, he realizes that she’s drawn a heart over the “i” in his name and his own real, alive, beating heart does a couple somersaults.

In the evening when he walks her to her car, the wind blowing her hair in her face and her hands rubbing together to keep them warm, he gets the urge to grab her hand in his. To really experience what it feels like to have their fingers interlaced. To keep her hands warm for her.

But he doesn’t know if he should, if she’d pull back, and the fear stops him. He just wishes her a goodbye like always does and when she’s gone the regret settles in.

It’s naive of him to think that El doesn’t feel the same way he does. She’s made it obvious, done her part with over kindness and less than subtle flirting.

He likes her. Really likes her. Maybe even more than likes her.

So he decides that when he sees her next week he’ll finally do something about it.

He'll ask her out.

Only when he gets to the shop that next Sunday, she's not there.

Instead in her place is the redheaded girl he had seen her talking to that first day, only ever having seen her briefly every now and then going in and out of the kitchen. She has a bored look on her face as she stands at the register playing with a calculator, but then she notices him and her face turns into one filled with amusement.

"Romeo," she smirks, putting the calculator down.

Mike turns and looks back to see if she's maybe talking to someone else but nope, it's definitely him.

"Yes. You," she laughs. "Your El's boy, right? Mike?"

"I'm not," he coughs. "I'm not *hers*."

"Unfortunately," she crosses her arm. He looks down at her name tag for the first time and reads it- Max -and decides he doesn't like her very much.

"Where's El," he asks her, starting to feel a little nervous under her stare.

"She's sick," Max says. "Got a stomach bug or something and called in this morning saying she couldn't come in. Sounded real disappointed."

"Yeah. I'd be disappointed too if I was sick."

Her smile fades and it turns into a scowl complete with an eye roll. It scarily reminds Mike of his sisters

"That's not why she's disappointed, genius!"

"What?"

"Look," Max says, putting her hands down on the counter and looking at him straight in the eyes, her blue eyed glare as cold as ice. "Do you like El or not?"

"Of course I do!"

"Do you *like her* like her?"

"*Like her* like her," Mike asks, obviously mocking her but Max only lets it bother her for a second. "What, are we in high school again?"

"I'm asking you this because she likes you," Max tells him bluntly and his smirk drops. "I don't really get why but she does. She literally never shuts up about you and I am always the one who has to listen to her complain about how you never get her hints."

Hints? Other than the little doodles and the free coffee, the occasional flirty conversation, Mike is 100% sure she hasn't dropped hints for anything specific. Unless, those are the hints that Max is talking about.

"Hints for what?"

"She wants you to ask her out," Max yells out in exasperation, her hands in the air and the few customers who are sitting around the shop turn to look at them. Mike feels embarrassed, still under Max's angry glare and now several curious stares, and he wishes he was back at his apartment. Or at least part of him.

His heart currently never wants to leave this moment, the moment where he finally gets confirmation that El Hopper wants him to ask her out. That if she was here, if he were to mutter the words out that have been lodged in his throat and in his mind since he saw her, she would say yes.

"Oh," he finally says quietly, the faintest smile on his face.

"Yeah," Max says, still annoyed but then quickly bouncing back to curious. "So are you?"

"I'm not telling you!"

He definitely is but there is no way he is letting her know that.

“Why not?”

“Because that’s personal and I don’t want you being a tattletale and telling El.”

“*Tattletale*,” Max mocks him this time. “What are we in elementary school again?”

Yeah, Max being one of El’s friends is definitely the one flaw that he can actually think of so far.

“Can I just have a coffee to go please,” he asks her, pulling his wallet out of his back jean pocket.

“You’re not staying around this time?”

“No,” he says, looking back at his usual table and then back to Max. “This place isn’t really the same without El.”

She actually smiles at him sympathetically, ringing him up and then quickly going to fetch his coffee. When she comes up and hands it to him, she keeps her hand on it and stares at him.

“Just don’t hurt El, okay,” she says, somehow hesitant and firm at the same time.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Mike says, taking it from her with a small smile and leaving the shop to go back to his car and back home.

What he does dream of is El. He wants to be able to tell her how pretty she is whenever he sees her. Wants to be able to hold her hand and wrap his arms around her, not just imagine what it feels like. Wants to be able to see her outside of that coffee shop, across a dinner table or next to him in a movie theater.

He dreams of her so much that it’s starting to seem like she’s out of his reach, like she’s something his mind made up, but he knows it’s real. What he feels for her is too intense to not be real.

Mike knows he can’t tell her he’s pretty sure he’s in love with her, not

yet, but he knows he can manage asking her a simple question. One that he already knows the answer to.

That next Sunday it begins to snow and Will tries to beg him to stay indoors, but Mike argues that it's not that bad. It's just a *little* snow. He'll be fine to drive because he has to be.

Because he is finally going to ask out out El.

Mike dresses up in his dark green sweater that his mom had told him once made him look so nice and his nicest jeans and wraps himself in his thickest coat. He layers on a beanie, a scarf, and some mittens to get Will off his back and then he sets off to see El.

He wants to drive faster, step on the gas pedal and get to see her as soon as possible since it's been fourteen days since he saw her last, but he knows he would probably crash if he did. He parks his car, grabs his backpack, and walks across the street to the shop and this time when he looks inside, El is standing there at the counter.

She looks gorgeous, her curls flowing down her back and only held back from her face by a ribbon the same soft shade of pink as her sweater. She's wearing those light blue jeans that he loves on her and even from afar he can tell that she's wearing lip gloss and he wonders what he'd taste if he kissed it off her.

Mike opens the door and she immediately looks up with a hopeful look on her face, something like pride filling inside his chest when he considers that she was probably waiting for him. He smiles at her and she smiles back, a cute little bounce in her place and his stomach starts fluttering.

"Hi," she says, still fully smiling and he realizes that it's one hundred percent contagious. "I didn't know if you were coming today."

"Of course I was coming," he tells her, his hand resting on the counter as he leans in to talk to her. "I missed you last week."

“Me too.”

“I’m guessing you’re feeling better, though.”

El nods her head, playing with the ends of one of her curls as she leans in.

“Yeah. I was motivated to get back here.”

“Oh yeah,” he asks, and he knows he’s completely flirting with her, can hear the way his voice sounds going into the world. “Why?”

“I’m just really passionate about coffee,” she smirks, a pretty rose tint rising on her cheeks and Mike wishes more than anything that he could just close the distance between them.

He doesn’t though, instead just asking for his usual and going to sit down at the table to make up for the writing that he didn’t do next week. El calls him up for his order a little while later, but when he reaches for it she pulls her hand back.

“You are going to walk me to my car today, right,” she asks, an eyebrow raised.

“I’m counting on it,” he responds, sending her a wink and she finally gives in and lets him grab the coffee cup.

Mike wonders what she’s drawn on it that time, but when he sits down and turns the cup around he doesn’t find a doodle. He finds a phone number. *Her* phone number! The complete ten-digit code that unlocks endless conversations with her whenever he wants, her name written right above it.

He looks up to see her staring at him, a flirtatious smile on her face and she sends a wink his way before disappearing off into the back. And he knows he should be writing, but he can’t because he knows no matter what he writes, nothing will ever be as good as the seven numbers El wrote on his cup.

He takes out his little black address and telephone book from his backpack and turns to the “H” section of it, carefully writing down El’s name and then copying her phone number onto it, making sure

he gets every number exactly right. He *can't* mess it up. When he's done he stares at it a bit and thinks about how this is the most important information he has ever had.

The rest of the day goes by surprisingly quickly, him writing more of his novel and El sending him smiles from across the room. By the time she's cleaning up the shop, he's finishing up his chapter and the drum of his heartbeat against his ribcage is enough to make him flustered and jittery.

El notices and laughs a bit. "Are you okay?"

"Mmhm," he mumbles trying to stop moving his legs but he physically can't stop. He's so nervous and excited.

El comes to his table once he's finished packing his things, her eyes landing on the cup of coffee from the morning.

"Are you throwing that away," she asks him, pointing to it and he quickly nods, handing it to her. He's too anxious to notice her face fall a bit as she puts it in the trash bag she's going to throw it.

After what seems like an eternity, El is finished doing everything. Mike puts his coat, gloves, scarf and beanie back on, El doing the same right beside him. Only she has the cutest hat he's ever, a pink beret that sits perfectly on top of her head and matches her pink gloves. She's so pretty, Mike can't keep his eyes off of her.

She leads them outside, the snow falling down on and around them in slow and soft flakes of white.

It's when she's locking the door, that Mike blurts out, "I don't want you to think that I threw away your phone number."

El quickly turns around, a curious eyebrow raised and a startled look on her face and Mike bites down on his tongue before continuing.

"I put it in my phonebook."

She's quiet for a moment, a smile tugging her mouth upwards just a bit and she bounces on her feet.

“You have a phone book?”

“Yeah,” he says quickly. He takes off one of his backpack straps and swings it around to his front, unzipping it and pulling out the book.

She takes it from him, going to the section where her name should be written and her eyes getting brighter. He thinks she may be laughing at his atrocious handwriting, but he wouldn’t blame her.

“You’re such a nerd,” she laughs, giving it back to him and he can’t help but laugh along with her.

“A nerd you saw something in though, right,” he asks teasingly. “You had to, to have given me your phone number.”

“Yeah.” Her smile becomes softer. “I did.”

“Cool.”

“Cool.”

They begin to walk to her car. Mike notices that they’re both walking slower than they usually do, the boot prints that they’re leaving in the snow much too close together. They’re also walking closer together, Mike swearing he can feel El’s body heat in contrast to the freezing weather. Can hear her heartbeat among the surprisingly quiet evening.

“So what are you writing anyways,” El asks to break the silence between them, still walking near him.

“A novel,” he says, and it hits him that in all that time they’ve talked with each other he hadn’t mentioned what he wrote. They’d talked about how she wanted to old a bookstore when she was old and grey and how he wanted to live in London for a year and how she had a corgi named Waffles growing up.

But they hadn’t discussed what he was spending all his time on at the coffee shop. Maybe it didn’t matter that much to either. Maybe it was never about that.

“What’s it about,” she asks, and it’s obvious she’s excited by the way

the tone in her voice gets higher and sweeter.

"It's a coming of age novel," he says. He doesn't know why he sounds embarrassed. Feels embarrassed. But he does all of a sudden. "It's about a high school boy who meets a girl working at a diner a few towns over because he had to take go with the football team on an away game and take video of it. And he keeps driving over to talk to this girl and they become friends."

"Just friends?"

He looks down at her, expectant gleam in her eyes.

"You'll have to read the book," he grins, and starts laughing when she rolls her eyes and pouts.

"I'll be the first to buy it then," she says. "What inspired you to write it?"

You.

"My high school life as a nerd basically. Dealing with friends moving away and bullies and sucky parents," he answers. And then adds before being able to stop himself. "The coffee shop inspired me, too."

"Well then I expect a spot in the acknowledgments page," she giggles.

Before he knows it, they're on the sidewalk right in front of her car. It has a thin layer of snow on it and he reaches over to help her brush it off the windows and mirrors. She smiles at him, makes a joke about how it's easier for him because he's taller and has bigger hands than she does.

When they're done, they stand facing each other. No people walking by them. Only a few cars driving by slowly.

"Can I be honest with you," Mike asks her and she takes a step closer.

"I always want you to be honest with me," El answers, pretty smile and rosy cheeks and hands tucked into her pockets.

"That coffee I had the first day really sucked."

She immediately has an offended look on her face, eyes wide and mouth agape and he can't help but laugh. Soon she's laughing too.

"Then why did you come back the next week," she asks him, taking her hand out of her pocket to smack him on the chest.

"I really wanted to see you again," he answers. Honestly. And she can tell, taking another step closer.

"Can I be honest with you, too," she asks him softly. He takes a step closer.

"Yeah."

"I was planning on quitting that day," she admits. She's looking up at him and he doesn't think she's ever looked more beautiful. "The only reason I didn't was because I wanted to see you again, too."

Mike feels his heart stop completely before picking up at a speed it's never been at before.

"Seriously?"

El's smile is faint but it's there as she takes her index finger and draws a cross over her heart in promise. She takes another step and reaches up to draw a heart over Mike's too. And before she's able to take it away, Mike brings up his hand and puts it over her finger, El splaying her fingers so that her full hand is on Mike's chest. His hand over hers.

Even through the gloves he can feel how warm she is. Even through the material he still feels the electricity.

"El, will you go out with me," Mike asks her, all in one breath.

Her smile turns wide and she puts her other hand on top of his.

"I never thought you'd ask," El nods and giggles. Mike almost wants to ask her to say it again, just so that he knows he's not imagining it all in his head. "Where are you taking me on this date?"

"Hmm I don't know," he says, quirking up an eyebrow like he's

thinking and then looking back in the direction they came from.
“There’s this cute coffee shop around here-.”

“Mike,” she laughs pushing her hands against him.

“We can talk about it over the phone.”

“Okay.”

He feels something shift. The wind or them. Or the universe.

It gives him the courage to ask, through hushed breath and in a whisper, but he asks, “Can I kiss you?”

She nods, still looking at him with sure eyes. His free hand comes up to her chin, lifting her head up. When he leans down, he can see a few snowflakes caught on her eyelashes, and it’s the last thing he sees before he closes his eyes and his lips meet hers.

Her lip gloss, as he discovers, tastes like cherries and there was no possible way she could have known that it’s his favorite fruit but he also knows it’s more than just coincidence. Nothing about them is coincidence.

He wonders for a bit if he tastes like cinnamon and caramel coffee. He wonders if she’s deciding that caramel coffee is a million times better than black coffee.

El’s hands comes up to his forearms, pulling him down even closer and anchoring herself to him. Her lips move against his and her face is cold. He still feels warm all over though.

When they stop to take a breath, he opens his eyes and sees her. Honey eyes and wide smile and dimples and snowflakes gone.

And he doesn’t think he will ever get tired of seeing her.

When Mike's novel gets published a year and a half from then, he's there with El when she opens the book to the dedication page.

To El. I hope this makes up for all the free coffee.

Author's Note:

i am desperate for validation and now also coffee